

How to Help Teenagers Quit Vaping

Though options are limited for now, they exist. For starters, parents should recognize that they are confronting an addiction to nicotine, which is hard to break.



Several brands of vaping devices. Parents should be able to recognize the different types of devices, experts say, and be on the lookout for them. Credit Elizabeth Frantz for The New York Times

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Vaping is surging among American adolescents. According to one national survey, 3.6 million middle and high school students used e-cigarettes in 2018. Another found that the rise in vaping from 2017 to 2018 was the sharpest for any substance the researchers had investigated in the project's 44-year history.

While e-cigarettes swept onto the market about a decade ago on the perception that they were largely benign — useful tools, in fact, to help smokers quit tobacco — concerns are growing over the harm that might be caused by the particles and chemicals users inhale. But the chief worry is over the ingredient commonly found in vaping liquids: nicotine.

Nicotine is the addictive chemical that chains both cigarette smokers and vapers, compelling them to repeated use. Its grip is tough to break.

Teenagers, whose brains are still developing, are particularly susceptible. Parents and educators are discovering that, unfortunately, there are no established protocols to help teenagers quit vaping. But there are measures parents can take.

You just found your child's empty vaping pods. Now what?

Don't panic. Also, don't go ballistic.

Before you confront, educate yourself.

What are good resources?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has a useful website on what the federal government currently knows about vaping and e-cigarettes.

The Tobacco Prevention Toolkit, by researchers at Stanford, has a major unit on vaping and Juuls. It is not just for educators: Frequently updated, it has photos, charts and points of discussion that may help you engage your teenager.

Now that I've got some facts, what's next?

Try to see e-cigarettes from the perspective of teenagers. They know that on the scale of all things forbidden, lots of substances — prescription and street drugs, alcohol and cigarettes, to name a few — rank far higher than vapes. While adolescents are canny enough to hide their Juuls from you, they don't really believe that vaping is harmful.

So if you unleash an angry outburst, they will likely push back, thinking you are making a big deal over nothing.

Also realize that the defensiveness and fibbing you're hearing may not be just a child reacting to being caught — the sort of behavior that earns consequences and stern lectures. This is different.

Your teenager may be addicted to nicotine. If you take a draconian stance, you are essentially threatening to put an addicted person into abrupt withdrawal.

You need another approach.

How do I reason with a teenage vaper?

"The trick is not to try to scare them, because scare tactics don't work at this point," said Dr. Suchitra Krishnan-Sarin, a Yale professor of psychiatry who focuses on adolescent behaviors and tobacco products. "But explaining how these products are making them addicted is the way to go."

Involve them in a conversation. Try to get them to recognize the compulsive quality of their behavior. Show them what researchers know about nicotine addiction and the questions they are raising about the possible long-term harms of vaping.

The goal is to encourage them to want to quit for their own good, not just to give you lip service and continue behind your back.

Are all teenagers who try vaping likely to become addicted?

Not necessarily. Some people can smoke one cigarette and have a glass of wine at a party — and that's it.

But nicotine addiction can happen swiftly and is extremely hard to extinguish. One factor is the amount of nicotine the user is exposed to. Some vaping devices, like Juul, provide high levels.

If there is a family history of addiction, or if other family members are using addictive substances like alcohol, tobacco or drugs at home, a teenager's vulnerability ratchets up.

Teenagers with anxiety or depression can also succumb more quickly. And, doctors note, withdrawing from nicotine can also set off anxiety and depression, at least temporarily.

What's the best way to quit?

Unfortunately, even the experts aren't sure.

"We as researchers are barely keeping up with the increased use and proliferation of these products," Dr. Krishnan-Sarin said. "We haven't started to scratch the surface."

Addiction medicine experts are beginning to suggest some approaches. Ask your pediatrician about them.

Cognitive behavioral therapy can help redirect thoughts when cravings hit. Talk therapy can address underlying anxiety or depression, which may be related to the reason the teen is vaping or have been triggered by quitting.

Other activities can calm an agitated mind in withdrawal, especially yoga, meditation and sports. A teenager can renew acquaintance with a passionate interest or hobby that might have fallen away.

Nicotine patches and prescription cessation medications might be worth exploring, though most are only approved for adults. Dr. Sharon Levy, an adolescent addiction medicine expert at Boston Children's Hospital, has begun prescribing nicotine replacement patches off-label for older teenagers who are motivated to quit.

Experts caution that there is no silver bullet. Instead, they suggest that you try a constellation of approaches.

You might also want to reach out to the school counselor: the struggle to quit could affect academic performance and classroom behavior.

Speaking of schools: Dr. Krishnan-Sarin also recommends that parents contact administrators not only to urge stricter policies toward vaping, but to insist that teachers and students receive vaping education.

The bottom line?

Many forces bore down to compel your child to vape, including social media, peer pressure and the easy accessibility of flavored products. It is really hard for any teenager to step away from those omnipresent enticements.

As your child struggles to break free, make sure they know you're not the enemy, but a steadfast ally.